

A R T Y K U Ł Y I R O Z P R A W Y [A R T I C L E S]

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MEMEPLEXES IN THE UKRAINIAN INFORMATION LANDSCAPE: AN ONOMASTIC PATH

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1. INTRODUCTION

It is unlikely that Richard Dawkins could have foreseen the popularity of his term *meme* when he published his book *The Selfish Gene*. Since its publication, the humanities have had a plethora of opinions on what exactly a meme is (henceforth memplex) and what are its characteristics. We resort to using the term *memplex* rather than *meme* as there are very few memes that are isolated from other memes, memes mostly come in closely interconnected clusters, forming memplexes.

The current study addresses an assumption about the similarity of the characteristics of proper names and memplexes. Studies on this topic are, to the best of our knowledge, particularly rare, although there are authoritative databases of memetic and onomastic investigations that include various approaches. This paper is an attempt to re-examine the concept of the proper name from the memetic perspective and will hopefully shed some light upon some of the more debatable issues related to the nature of proper names. Other foci of our investigation include the main criteria for memplexes and the key characteristics for proper names.

Our investigation provides a number of insights into the Ukrainian cultural landscape. The material for our study was chosen on a popularity basis and so we selected those proper names which are considered to be an intrinsic part of the Ukrainian memescape: anthroponyms, toponyms, brand names (ergonyms), zoonyms, chrononyms.

The article consists of several parts: an introduction, three sections, and a conclusion. Following the introduction, the first part of the paper, the notion of the memeplex, concentrates on different approaches to the meme, discusses adjacent notions such as ideavirus and memescape, and dwells on the characteristics of memeplexes (rapid spread, expression of social and cultural norms, longevity, adaptability, variability, revealing the collective identity, defining cultural heritage). The second part explores the theoretical framework of onomastic studies and defines the key aspects of properhood. The third part analyses the similarities between memeplexes and proper names and aims at tracing the main aspects of memeplexes present in Ukrainian proper names. Finally, the conclusions demonstrate the study's outcomes and suggest the need for further onomastic investigations which could chart a larger map of proper names as memeplexes in world cultures.

2. THE NOTION OF MEMEPLEX

The understanding of a *memeplex* has two approaches. The first states that a memeplex is similar to an idea. Following Dawkins (2006), McNamara (2011) defines a memeplex as a fuzzy, non-delineated concept or ideas, embodied by a word, phrase, image, riff, or gesture. Similar views are found in Dennett (1990) and Lynch (1996). The spread of an idea (memeplex) is rapid and uncontrollable, and usually a very wide circle of people can fall under its influence.

The second perspective understands a memeplex as a unit of cultural information. As Knobel and Lankshear (2007, p. 199) define it: "Memes are contagious patterns of 'cultural information' that get passed from mind to mind and directly generate and shape the mindsets and significant forms of behaviour and actions of a social group." Following this assumption, a memeplex produces a powerful effect on a person due to its cultural background. The interconnected cultural and social implications exercise an influence which blends both tradition and modernity.

The term *ideavirus* is worth mentioning in our study as it fully conveys the notion of a memeplex. It is defined as "a big idea that runs amok across the target audience. It's a fashionable idea that propagates through a section of the population, teaching and changing, and influencing everyone it touches" (Godin, 2001, p. 14). As can be seen from the definition, both an ideavirus and a memeplex propagate themselves through a population in an uncontrollable fashion and possess the ability to have a powerful impact. We plan to provide empirical justification

in the further studies, although there is one concept from internet culture which gives some proofs on the impossibility of controlling the spread of memeplexes. This is the case of the so-called *forced meme* (Grandmaster the Grandmaster, 2009) when a person or group of people creates a concept which seems promising and they have the intention of using it in a viral marketing campaign or for personal entertainment. Frequently, however, their attempts to attract attention to the new memeplex fail and this memeplex is called forced.

Heylighen's opinion on the memeplex includes the deduction that a meme is a cultural replicator, a unit of imitation or communication, which could include ideas, cultural entities (i.e. images, books, poems, theories, religions, language, melodies, rumors, informational or behavioral patterns as well). Memeplexes have a lot of variations and undergo further alterations, with the result that they are evolving, developing and increasing the range of their habitat. In a rather short period of time, we can already see a whole complex of memes — *memeplex* — a collection of mutually supporting memes, eclectically interconnected, which tend to replicate together (Heylighen, 1996). They power the intertextuality of the informational landscape.

The opinions above focus on the so-called 'classic memeplexes' which have a long history and are embedded into numerous cultural practices: books, theories, songs, tunes, rhymes, iconic images, ideas, phrases, gestures, painting styles, fashion, etc. However, here we cannot omit their most widely spread variation: internet memeplexes. When speaking about internet memeplexes, Dawkins noted in his interview (Solon, 2013) that their "meaning is not that far away from the original. It's anything that goes viral." The American Psychological Association also distinguishes between two variants: one adheres to the understanding of the memeplex as "a unit of practice or belief through which a society or culture evolves and that passes from one generation or even one person) to the next" (VandenBos, 2015, p. 636), the other can be defined as the internet memeplex which is represented as "an idea usually rooted in popular culture that is widely popularised and distributed on the World Wide Web" (VandenBos, 2015, p. 636).

During our research, we tend to turn to the definitions of both 'classic' and internet memeplexes. For both approaches to memeplexes, therefore, we can classify this phenomenon as something that spreads very quickly with the help (either intentional or subtle, unconscious) of a wide range of different strata of the population. When speaking about the *internet memeplex*, we define it as follows: it is a distinctive joke, photo or video that has a name, in some cases this image is remixed and can simultaneously be represented by all of the ways mentioned above.

From these two approaches to understanding the phenomenon of a memeplex we may draw the following conclusions. Almost every cultural notion could be

a meme if it spreads across time and physical space. The perception of a meme as an idea excludes such cultural manifestations as musical riffs or visual images. To recapitulate: a *memeplex* is a part of the information that passes via social channels, its key characteristics are conciseness and swift mode of distribution.

With the development of new channels of communication, the scope of the dissemination of memeplexes has widened. Considering the fact that internet media are unpredictable and they do not have strict differentiation between incoming and outgoing channels of information, the process can be viewed as memetic evolution which transpires in the course of weeks, days, and even hours. The 'classic' memeplexes developed in a much slower way. Therefore, both types of memeplexes form *memescape*, the collection of memeplexes that are functional and shared by all members of a cultural group. All memeplexes seem to possess the following characteristics: rapid spread, expression of social and cultural norms, longevity, adaptability, variability, revealing a collective identity, defining cultural heritage.

2.1. Rapid spread

Their uncontrollable and rapid spread are particularly interesting characteristics of a memeplex. By drawing on the concept of memeplexes, Phillips notes that one of the prominent characteristics, allowing a memeplex to spread fast, is that "something about it lines up with an already-established set of linguistic and cultural norms" (Phillips, 2010).

A memeplex is frequently formed in a whimsical fashion, and, in these cases, there is still little understanding as to why and what might be the trigger for its uncontrollable spread. The rapid speed for this spread is also connected with the fast-evolving process of memetic formation. This rapidity of spreading is most likely closely connected with emotional coherence within a cultural community. The development of a meme into a memeplex happens dramatically fast: at first, it starts with one image, word, tune, etc., and very quickly it is copied and altered with any image-editing software many times, circulating via threads in different communities, thus it becomes a cluster which is united by one theme (a personage, object, riff or action).

Speaking about memeplexes in the cultural poetics paradigm, Drout emphasizes that memeplexes are more likely to be spread if they are mnemonically stable and linked to mnemonically important elements (Drout, 2006, p. 282). A possible explanation is that mnemonic elements connected with associative thinking and sensory field comprise and execute memetic drive in memeplexes. A human becomes a means of spreading or an agent for memeplex dissemination. The memetic drive seems to be based on emotional selection.

2.2. Expressing social and cultural norms

According to Gal et al. (2016, p. 1700), the expression of existing social and cultural norms and, at the same time, a social tool for discussing them, is one of the main characteristics of a memplex. The close relation to the process of norm formation is seen in the memplex life cycle (assimilation-retention-expression-transmission). After experiencing the whole cycle, memplexes are embedded into our reality, our way of life, and common experience. They frequently tend to mirror the real world in a way which is based on social and cultural norms.

2.3. Longevity

Memplexes absorb the crucial traits of different communities, creating and at the same time (re)construct a new cultural landscape. These characteristics are clearly depicted as they persist in the cultural paradigm. They acknowledge and confirm the existing, older memplexes that have been surviving for a long time. This is at the same time one of the proofs of heritage as behavioral cultural patterns, i.e. greeting, saying goodbye, the way of celebrating holidays, features of various rituals, etc.

2.4. Adaptability

The human cultural landscape has always been a means for memplexes to fully reveal their ability to change in order to spread more successfully and efficiently within new circumstances. Now media added more details so the memplexes “seem easier to ‘try on’ (i.e. trialability and ease of use),” are “more accessible (i.e. observability and normative character) and more reasonable or resonant (i.e. relative advantage)” (Spitzberg, 2014, p. 316). These features, comprising adaptability on the whole, can be seen as the reason for rapid spreading of memplexes within cultural systems and their advancement and merging into the new systems of human spheres.

2.5. Variability

According to common opinion, memplexes spread chaotically and adapt rapidly. Their animating force tends to adjust to cultural factors and conditions. It is highly likely that the variability of memplexes lies in psychological continuity where all communal reflexive experience is mirrored. This aspect, which greatly contributes to variability, “consists of the holding of a number of psychological relations between person-stages ... as well as the holding of relations

that are involved in the retention over time of personality and character traits” (Shoemaker, n.d.).

Memplexes, transcending geographical and cultural boundaries, produce regional variants of themselves, as one of their qualities is adaptation, which is “the potential of the meme to adjust to the constraints and demands of the networks through which the meme is propagated and replicated” (Spitzberg, 2014, p. 317).

2.6. Replication

By *replication* we mean a process where an entity makes a copy of itself. Accordingly, memplexes are cultural units that are capable of replication with a high degree of fidelity. According to Spitzberg (2014, p. 312), replication implies imitation which is “a process of communication, in which one social organism, group, or system engages in activity that represents an informational duplicate or derivative version of another act or meaning.”

The process of copying involves a collective memory bank and cultural background which are manipulated to create the intended mental representation or meaning (Kilpinen, 2008, p. 231).

The collective narrative reveals itself in replication and reuse, social-cultural bonds are activated and thus nourish collective memory. The process of creation and replication reinforces discourse and boosts the feeling of identity.

Memory is an important component in the process of memplex replication and competition. In the information world, the limited time and attention of human behavior are sufficient to generate a complex information landscape and define a wide range of different memplex spreading patterns (Weng et al., 2012).

2.7. Revealing the collective identity

Another significant aspect of memplexes is that they reveal a collective identity. It is almost certain that memplexes arise from general human experience which is mirrored in self-construal based on ancestry, as well as retrospective and prospective circumstances. The broad use of the term *collective identity* is sometimes equated with highlighting our connectedness with those who share similar characteristics (Matsumoto, 2009, p. 245). This definition allows for a connection between memplexes and collective identity to be established. Being part of collective identity, memplexes “resonate with common experiences, from enjoying the beauties of nature to personally identifying with branded products” (Bennett, 2003, p. 32). Memplexes embody the connectedness by sharing, creating and remixing, thus becoming the agents of participatory culture.

2.8. Representing cultural heritage

Memplexes are often seen as a part of cultural heritage as they are passed from one generation to the next and in some way define a sense of cultural group identity. Cultural heritage also includes specific technological or artistic achievements (VandenBos, 2015, p. 273) which can be seen as experience passed down by previous generations.

Taking a biological stance, memplexes are thought to be similar to genes which spread themselves among a population. As an information unit, a memplex plays a great role in spreading and anchoring cultural heritage, it “can change minds, alter behaviour, catalyse collective mindshifts and transform cultures” (Lasn, 1999, p. 116). This feature includes the involvement of pre-existing cultural and social artefacts.

Thus we can deduce that a *memplex* is a self-subsistent separate unit of culture which is defined collectively by the culture carriers. The members of a group of a certain cultural heritage decide and appoint the units of cultural information.

There are two approaches to defining the phenomenon of a memplex: either seeing it as an idea or as a unit of cultural information. Almost every cultural notion could become a meme if it spreads across time and physical space. The understanding of a meme as an idea excludes such cultural manifestations as musical riffs or visual images. Here we speak about musical riffs and visual images without a verbal component, as they mostly appeal to sensual experience of a person. Following this line of thought, a memplex as an idea could not include a sound component as it very often contains a less complex cluster of meanings.

To recapitulate: a *memplex* is a part of the information that is passed via social channels; its key characteristics are conciseness and swift expansion.

This section has attempted to provide our definition of a memplex and outline its most common features: rapid spread, expression of social and cultural norms, longevity, adaptability, variability, revealing collective identity, defining cultural heritage.

3. THE NOTION OF A PROPER NAME

In this part, we analyze the notion of a proper name. The question of properhood has a long-standing tradition in onomastic studies and remains a subject of discussion and contention. This section tackles the three characteristics of proper names which, in our opinion, constitute properhood and makes an attempt to analyze them.

3.1. Actualizing social convention

As Willems points out, “a necessary condition for a word to be a proper name is that it is categorically intended as such” (2000, p. 109). Willems’ stance focuses on the everyday experience of a speaker and here we can agree that this approach is appropriate for researching memeplexes in the onomastic landscape as it contains proper names known or familiar to conventional speakers at a definite period of time.

Blanár’s observation (2009, p. 91) that onymy and onymic systems can only exist in social communication supports Willems’ suggestion. Blanár’s view focuses on social aspects of proper names and Willems’ view pinpoints the key features of this approach: only those are proper names that are socially accepted and recognized as parts of the onomastic landscape. The non-linguistic information field frequently defines the notion of a proper name in everyday speech which strongly influences the formation of the onomastic landscape.

A name is an expression assigned uniquely to an entity in established onomastic and linguistic convention (Van Langendonck, 2013, p. 101). Similarly, Pamp (1985, p. 111) supported this view by claiming that a proper name is a linguistic sign, the use of which is so conventionalized that it functions as a word. Here we can follow the logic of transforming a once used naming of a memeplex into a conventional proper name. All of them stem from a one-time description which characterizes a phenomenon in the best possible way and then, after numerous acts of usage, it becomes a proper name, then a memeplex and ultimately acquires the status of a memetic proper name (onymic memeplex). Here we deal with proper names expressing social norms at different aspects, revealing adaptability, longevity, and rapid spread.

Coates (2006, p. 371) advances the viewpoint on the matter of properhood where proper can be equated with senseless. His definition states that properhood is not primarily ‘senseless denoting’, but ‘senseless referring’. He concludes that the best characterization of the nature of properhood is pragmatic: that it is a type of referring that discounts the sense of any lexical items (real or apparent) in the expression that is being used to do the referring.

3.2. Representing a unique phenomenon

The second feature characterizing properhood in proper names is the representation of a unique phenomenon. A proper name is a name given to a definite object or person to distinguish it from a series of similar objects (Buchko, 2012, p. 62). Following the logic of this definition, we note that any name defines and singles

out a phenomenon (here we take the onymic memeplex as the subject of our investigation) from its pool. Sjöblom (2021, p. 257) expresses a similar opinion on proper names, where she draws on the perspective of trade names and notes that they individualize and simultaneously single out from a plethora of objects.

Willems (2000, p. 110) describes one-dimensionality as one of the key characteristics of proper names. A proper name is restricted to a single referential (individualizing) function. Usually, this is the case when a name is little known to the recipient of the information. If the name is familiar to the person, it possesses multiple cultural informational dimensions, thus revealing a referential field.

One more explanation of the nature of a proper name is provided by Pamp (1985, p. 112): it is always monoreferential and refers to only one phenomenon or one group of phenomena. From this he deduces that a name always indicates that the referent is in some way unique in the world.

In most cases, a name bears a descriptive character at the earlier stages of use to describe its uniqueness: *Angry Ukrainian Kid* (Sashko Fokin, the boy who took part in a Ukrainian TV show and became famous after he threw a tantrum after his mom took away his computer). Similarly, almost all traditional Ukrainian names bore meaning when they were coined by people, the name-elements were meaningful at the time and some have retained their meaning by now as in *Владислав* [Vladislav] (*vlad* — power, *slav* — glory). Hence, a purely casual name evolves into a constant member of a category with time. The retention process in onymic memeplexes involves collective memory, duration; the communication procedures are merged into one memetic drive and reinforced by cultural evolution. Here proper names also reveal such memetic features as expressing cultural heritage and identity. This aspect will be discussed more thoroughly below.

In a similar vein, Semenza (2010, p. 431) comes to the opinion that proper names are thought to relate to their reference in a 'token' (individual) as opposed to 'type' (categorical) fashion, which is the case for common nouns. Thus, proper names refer to unique phenomena rather than to categories of objects.

Being connected to a unique phenomenon is a key characteristic of a proper name, it performs a distinctive function, and it shows up when an individual divergence identifies with social importance (Yu. Karpenko, 2004, p. 83). Social importance manifests itself in the memetic nature of proper names, their memetic drive is based on conceptual meaning and the emotional component which is often blended with cultural information.

Uniqueness can be seen as one of the dominant factors in shaping the notion of properhood. Although cosmonyms are common to most cultures, their inventory is specific in every cultural landscape. For instance, *the Milky Way* is called in Ukraine *Чумацький Шлях* (The way of chumaks, a historical name for the salt

merchants). These merchants are considered to play a great role in the development of the Ukrainian spiritual and material culture and nation-building process, which is reflected in the Ukrainian onomastic landscape. Following social convention, uniqueness is highly likely to constitute one of the crucial features of proper names.

3.3. Being a concept

Speaking about the cognitive psychology of proper name memory, Brennen (2000, p. 142) claims that personal names are difficult to learn and hard to recall. There are three reasons for this phenomenon: proper names are phonologically random and lack any possible order, they are not assimilated semantically, and it is difficult to manage their meaning. Still, there is some reason that makes them endure and prosper in all natural languages. This clearly indicates the memetic feature manifested as longevity.

Van Langedonck (2007, p. 438) claims that proper names are used primarily to refer to a thing, and not to describe it. Further (439) he defines the essence of a proper name as a reference to a 'thing' in an *ad hoc* way based on a basic level categorial presupposition.

Karpenko (2006, p. 113) comes to the conclusion that names are practically onymic concepts. Onymic concepts are understood as units of information storage, "units of mental or psychic resources of our consciousness, and the informative structure that reflects knowledge and experience of the human being." Here experience blends into memetic structures which facilitate information flow. Memeplexes are the essence of experience and collective memory where certain proper names acquire the properties of signalling identity and, thus become important.

The structure of an onymic concept is embodied in three aspects (Karpenko, 2016, p. 71): 1. A verbal field, which is self-explanatory; 2. An informational field, where we refer to 'autobiographical' and general encyclopedic information about the entity; 3. A sensory field, where visual, auditory, and kinesthetic information is stored. The verbal field triggers the two other fields which in turn execute the memetic drive of proper names. Hence, the blend of three aspects becomes a proper name's mental representation, within which no strict line can be drawn between different types of knowledge (Reszegi, 2018, p. 152).

Kripke's opinion on proper names is that they are rigid designators and that in any possible world they designate the same object (2001, pp. 48–49). Here any possible world can be interpreted as multiple contextual nuances. A proper name has characteristics that make it distinguishable from others, realizing the memeplex abilities and revealing the memetic drive. An onymic memeplex may not be lexically transparent though meaning is accessed through cultural background, informational field.

Lukash (2011, p. 6) interprets the proper name as a huge informational cluster. The cluster is defined by the proper name's ability to be an essence of the people's portrayal of the world, the synopsis of the culture. The cluster can be a background to some other pieces of information as well and here we can see an ample overlap with the views of Karpenko. The proper name as a conceptual cluster including all the information triggers captures the essence of the information in a very concise form, which leads us to the conclusion that a proper name can often bear memetic characteristics.

This part of the article has hopefully shed light on our understanding of the nature of proper names and dwelt on the three aspects characterizing proper names: social convention, uniqueness, and being a concept.

4. PROPER NAME AS A MEMEPLEX

In this part of the article, we dwell on a topic which, to the best of our knowledge, has never been described before in onomastic research: the memetic features of a proper name. To fully cover this topic, we should scrutinize the idea that proper names are memetic entities. We elaborate on the notion of an onymic memeplex — a proper name which has all the characteristics intrinsic to memeplex. Almost all proper names can become memeplexes, although not all memeplexes are proper names.

As time passes, proper names undergo a sorting process and acquire cultural prominence and result in an onomastic memescape. A proper name can become unique to the speaker for the reasons of cultural tradition, social circumstances, and psychological inclinations. Consequently, these aspects transform the linguistic status into onomastic through memetic features. The removal of irrelevant information noise and redundant language brings into life a short memetic unit — a proper name as an onymic memeplex.

All members of a cultural community engage in the process of onomastic landscape formation to some degree. All people who take part in contributing, sharing, liking, commenting, viewing, and remixing content are parts of the common space and they are related by shared experience. This common space “has a coherent cultural logic” (Burgess & Green, 2009, p. 57) despite sundry manipulations with content and various motivating forces. Onymic memeplexes enhance participatory culture, being an integral part of common cultural logic.

Brennen (2000, p. 144) sees the essence of proper names as having two meanings: internal and external. The first refers to what the name means to the bearer and the latter is perceived by the outside world. External and internal meanings become the blend which possesses memetic features. Thus, while constructing onymic memeplexes, we define these characteristics as follows: longevity, copy-fidelity,

fecundity, uncontrollable spreading. Internal meaning can be accessed through personal memory, external — through collective memory. These features are examined in more detail below.

4.1. Rapid spread

Turning to the special traits of spreading proper names, we should speak about the long-standing tradition of naming practices and the role of proper names in the modern changing world. In the pre-internet era, the speed of spreading was slower and, as a rule, it was by word-of-mouth. In most cases, cultural features played a key role in the process of spreading, especially prominent were rituals and religious calendars.

Proper names are embedded within the norms of Ukrainian onomastic conventions which have facilitated their rapid spread and wide coverage, with this seemingly in accordance with the mechanism of the spread of memplexes. For example, a long-standing tradition of naming children in Ukraine relies heavily on religious holidays and is prominent even now (parents can consult religious calendars and holidays). The calendar has days dedicated to particular saints and parents can choose the name which matches the day of the birth of their child. On the other hand, with the reduction of the significance of the role of religion, the name choice is now not limited by Orthodox traditions and is heavily influenced by various cultural factors.

Both memplexes and proper names spread at high speeds. Any proper name can do so although the most common in the Ukrainian memescape are anthroponyms, ergonyms (the brand name of beer *Corona* became memetic due to the Covid-19), and toponyms (*Моршин* [Morshyn], the first city where the population was vaccinated). As it is well known, there are certain proper name trends (the most prominent are anthroponyms), when a certain proper name is used by a wider part of a cultural group. For example, the male names *Олександр* [Oleksandr], *Дмитро* [Dmytro], *Сергій* [Sergiy], and *Андрій* [Andriy] have been among the top 10 most popular names over the decades in Ukraine (State Statistics Service of Ukraine, n.d.). Of course, at some point, proper names can become less popular and may even seem outdated. The same can be seen with the memplexes as they undergo a chain of changes: development, having a place in the onomastic landscape, oblivion or reincarnation (onymic memplexes which recursively return are similar). Unfortunately, with time some associations connected with proper names become obsolete or simply forgotten. For example, one iconic name within the time frame of one generation becomes forgotten by the next. Here we see similarities between proper names and memplexes as they “tend to propagate

virally, independent of a centralised source because they tie into the cultural zeitgeist or answer some cultural need” (Burton, 2016).

Memplexes represent the traits that are described in the social brain hypothesis, they are “about the ability to manipulate information, not simply to remember it” (Dunbar, 1998, p. 184). Onyms as memetic linguistic units are part of a social exchange that involves the transition of experience both to the next generation and within the same generation. These features fully reflect the process of operating the informational and cultural background which contributes considerably to the rapid spread of memplexes.

4.2. Expressing social and cultural norms

Now we turn to the feature of expressing cultural and social norms, since proper names are intertwined with these norms. Established naming practices can be regarded as evidence of this and in Ukraine, there are rather rigid traditional norms for naming pets. There are common canine names like *Барбос* [Barbos] and *Кнопа* [Knopa], which are not seen as fit for felines and, vice versa, there are names which are more appropriate for felines: *Маркіз* [Markiz], *Мурка* [Murka], *Марсік* [Marsik] which would sound odd to Ukrainians if they were given to dogs.

Proper names comply with “rule, value, or standard that delineates an accepted and appropriate behaviour within a culture” (VandenBos, 2015, p. 274) and, thus realize cultural norms. Also, proper names execute social norms as they realize “a) what behaviours are considered typical in a given context (descriptive norms) and (b) what behaviours are considered proper in the context (injunctive norms)” (VandenBos, 2015, p. 998). Continuing our exemplification in zoonyms, we note that it is rather common to give English or French names to pedigree pets, like *Лакі* (Lucky), *Жирар* (Gerard), *Джекі* (Jackie), and *Меґі* (Maggie). Speaking about trends in naming practices, we also see how social norms are regarded. When choosing a name for a pet, an owner usually follows three strategies: choosing a traditional one, which has been used by many before them (for a cat *Мурзік* [Murzik], *Мурчик* [Murchik]), following a popular TV show (for a husky dog *Сноу* (Snow) or *Джон* (John), following the name of *Jon Snow*, a character in the *Game of Thrones*) or going along with proper name trends. Personal taste is usually influenced by these strategies even though a person may not always realize this. For example, personal taste is revealed through naming strategies and promoting pet names that ‘predict’ the outcomes of sporting events (Horvat, 2020, p. 77). In Ukraine, many people follow the ‘weather forecasts’ of *Тымко the Groundhog*, while *Paul the Octopus* was also very popular among football fans in the 2010s. Here we can clearly see that the zoonyms became memplexes although their

naming was the decision of their owners. We see the fact that proper names are linguistic universals as evidence of their memetic features reflected in social and cultural norms as well.

Turning now to the process of expressing social and cultural norms, we note that both proper names and memeplexes have a shared psychology. As Heath et al. argue, memeplexes “undergo a kind of *emotional selection* — they are selected and retained in the social environment in part based on their ability to tap emotions that are common across individuals” (Heath et al., 2001, p. 1029). Proper names also have an evaluative quality, which is highly likely to be their reason for the expression of social and cultural norms and also contributes to longevity.

Another significant similarity between proper names and memeplexes lies in their similar roles in discourse. While speaking about internet culture, Milner (2012, p. 142) noted that memeplexes not only share a common set of characters and textual rules, but they also tend to gravitate around a core set of subjects. This observation is true for ‘common’ memeplexes and proper names. The dominant social and cultural discourses are built largely around social identity distinctions and proper name characteristics as well. At the same time, they allow for the possibility of delineating shared features and areas.

During the development and continuous evolution, minor memeplexes enter the common cultural landscape or are born within its limits. The constant flow of information is most likely to be guided by the emotional selection, circumstances, and cultural norms. Here “memes (memeplexes) can be described as stimuli entering the neural system; the stimuli or information are encoded, manipulated, and then stored” (Pech, 2003, p. 177). Onymic proper names as part of a wider memescape are connected with cultural ties, associations and allusions to others. For example, the proper name and trademark *Barbie* as the worldwide phenomenon is also present in the Ukrainian social and cultural landscape. Within years this children’s toy has acquired connotations and memetic features. In her book, Lukash (2017, p. 54) registers *Барбі* (*Barbie*) as a chrematonym with the following meanings: 1. a blonde beauty, 2. a stereotype of feminine beauty. There is also the notion of *жива Барбі* ‘a living Barbie’ (“*Živa lâl'ka Barbi*”, 2017) to describe someone who has undergone extensive plastic surgery, becoming close to the proportions of the doll in question. Here we see the migration and successful implementation of the memeplex, thus embedding it into the social and cultural norms of the Ukrainian cultural landscape.

Norms are based on repeating elements. Some researchers claim that internet memeplexes are designed to circulate in real-time networks that work with repeating elements (Lovink & Tuters, 2018). Here we would like to dwell on the notion of repeating elements. These conceptual repeating components are present in the ‘traditional’ memeplexes as well. Every memeplex contains repeating

elements which make it a memeplex. They contribute to the variability of the onomastic landscape and the prominence of cultural layers. Proper names as carriers of cultural information have conceptual repeating elements which are present in onymic concepts. The sensory and informational field has a memetic drive, the potential energy to make an onymic memeplex worth spreading among the closest people or more distant social communities.

4.3. Longevity

In this part of our article, we dwell on longevity which is important to our view on proper names as memeplexes. *Longevity* is interpreted here as the cultural persistence of proper names. According to popular opinion, the “human brain has evolved not only to spread memes but to select which memes to replicate” (Bull, Holland & Blackmore, 2000, p. 229). The majority of widely spread proper names have a long history in various cultural paradigms. Proper names have become the prominent milestones in education as a means of transferring cultural heritage and memetic tradition to the future generations. Dennett (1991, p. 205) suggests that memeplexes like genes are potentially immortal unless there are physical vehicles for their very existence.

Proper names (especially anthroponyms and toponyms) throughout their existence have persisted and undergone a lot of alterations, and this process is active today. Thus, longevity can potentially influence such memetic features as adaptability and variability. Although the language form of proper names can vary with time, their memetic potential, cultural ties, and information background can change very slowly within the cultural landscape. Acquiring memetic drive through its importance to the cultural landscape, a proper name becomes an onymic memeplex.

Occasionally an onymic memeplex is blended with other pop-culture artefacts, references or other social information milestones. The existing conceptual information in proper names is accumulated through the process of adding new cultural data. Frequently, an onymic memeplex becomes a source of inspiration for further generations and is blended with other memeplexes. These circumstances ensure the longevity of onymic memeplexes.

For instance, the cycle of three religious holidays in summer *Першій, Другий, Третій Спась* ‘The First, Second, Third Spas (Transfiguration of Jesus)’ can be regarded as an onymic memeplex (memetic chrononym). This cycle of three holidays is celebrated according to the longstanding religious ritual and bears historical and symbolic meaning. The name *Спась* [Spas] is shortened from *Спасител’* ‘Saviour’, though the meaning can be somewhat obscure to a modern Ukrainian. The celebration of these holidays is considered to be an appropriate behavioral pattern. The characteristics of these onymic memeplexes include the date of

celebration (August 14, August 19, August 28), and the way of celebrating them (take seasonal fruits and honey to church for blessing). *Spas* has a longstanding historical meaning with roots in the Ukrainian agricultural calendar as a harvest holiday. Also, it has the symbolic meaning as the first harvest (mostly apples, pears, and honey) is taken to church and embodies gratitude to God. Here we have a very vivid example of how the cultural landscape works, how an onymic memeplex persists and defines itself through its participants.

Proper names as onymic memeplexes show rather high copying fidelity. They exist in the established onomastic convention and often bear huge cultural connotations. Proper names with a long history still play an important role in the Ukrainian informational landscape because they are important to the culture. Their memetic drive is the cause of transferring them into the social and cultural heritage and preserving them for the next generations. All this makes onymic memeplexes so persistent in the collective memory.

4.4. Adaptability

This section of our article examines *adaptability* as one of the essential features of proper names that contribute to our view of proper names as memeplexes. The adaptability of onymic memeplexes is the feature that is acquired out of necessity to introduce itself into the cultural context that is new to it. To enter and win an intense competition for the attention of the community and, hence, the place in the informational landscape, the onymic memeplex could change its peripheral characteristics, leaving the core intact. An onymic memeplex is likely to be more competitive when it possesses adaptive fitness for a given information niche.

Most of the first changes when an onymic memeplex enters the unexplored cultural landscape are realized in the language sphere, particularly on the phonetic and graphic levels. A similar process can be seen with the onym *Hugo Award* when it entered the Ukrainian onomastic landscape. It is represented in Ukrainian as *Премія Г'юґо* [Premiya G'yugo], it changes graphic features (Cyrillic letters) and phonetic features to adapt to the Ukrainian pronunciation.

The ability to adapt linguistically results in cultural diffusion into the informational landscape and the adaptation process of onomastic memeplexes occurs in both synchronic and diachronic ways. Here we understand the synchronic way as the frequent usage of onymic memeplexes by a community, it is often connected with onymic trends, success and zeitgeist. To illustrate, at the height of the professional career of the boxer *Mike Tyson*, his last name became a popular pet name for the dogs of the boxer breed, *Тайсон* [Tayson].

The diachronic way is seen as the information flow between generations. Castlefranci notes that to spread from one “generation (and not from one individual) to another, the trait is supposed to be diffused within the first generation” (Castlefranci, 2001, p. 3). The process of primary diachronic diffusion occurs when cultural assimilation is over, by this time the onym has already become a part of the common onomastic landscape and it is reflected in the tradition and legacy. When the process of adaptability is complete, a proper name persists as an onymic memeplex.

4.5. Variability

Another significant aspect of the memetic nature of proper names is *variability*. By the end of the cultural assimilation process, the proper name acquires the phonological and grammatical traits of the recipient language, creating several variants in the course of its adaptation. As a result we have a lot of variations of the original onymic memeplex; one of the examples could be seen in the variability of diminutive forms of Ukrainian male or female names. A highly frequent Ukrainian male name *Олександр* [Oleksandr] has variants such as *Sashko*, *Les*’, *Oles*’, *Sanya*, *Alex*, *Sasha*, *Shurik* and *Shura*. The variability of Ukrainian names strongly benefits from the national informational landscape and has some influence from other languages.

Variability is the result of distributed creativity. The process of the adaptation of memeplexes is shared by the majority of the social and cultural community. This collective generation of memetic content heavily relies upon collaborative emergence, which has the following characteristics: unforeseeable result, moment-to-moment contingency, any activity could be modified by the following actions and coequal input (Sawyer & DeZutter, 2009, p. 82).

Besides a lot of variability in anthroponymic forms, there are also traces of creativity in other types of onyms. The onymic memeplexes can have a lot of variants of one meme that differ by setting but the main theme or character remains the same. To illustrate: *Біблія* (Bible) has a lot of instances in multiple memescapes although the main theme persists in the logical constant ‘authoritative source’.

The Ukrainian memeplexes, like all culture-specific memeplexes, are produced from a shared cultural experience. As in most communities, they are heavily concentrated on the Ukrainian civil discourse and are bound to the problems and issues discussed in Ukrainian society. Speaking about onymic memeplexes that belong to the world’s shared culture, we can note that they are transformed to suit the needs of local cultures and communities but still they maintain their

core themes. Variability ensures flexibility and the ability to change, preserving the core abilities of onymic memeplexes at the same time.

4.6. Replication

This part of our article attempts to shed light on the notion of *replication* in onymic memeplexes. *Replication* is used here as a notion synonymous to the ability to produce a copy of itself, self-reproduction. Reproduction is seen as one of the forms of cultural transmission, caused by evocation and reconstruction. A lot of proper names have common roots in prominent works from both the oral and written traditions, and in the course of time these proper names were replicated and reproduced in different contexts.

Reproduction as the process of the embodiment and circulation of mental information in the physical environment could be seen as a potent actor in the phenomenon of intertextuality. And, at the same time, intertextuality is one of the characteristics that contribute to memeplex fecundity (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007, p. 210). In the process of the replication of onymic memeplexes, we are likely to see the information exchange between the original, older layers of culture and the newest ones. This process encapsulates the evocation of background information and its replication at a higher level (Boudry, 2018).

An onymic concept includes a lot of associations and links which can reveal ties with various domains of our experience. Here, the onymic memeplex *Шевченко* [Shevchenko] can be seen as a powerful means for intertextuality within contemporary Ukrainian society. One of the most recent examples is the rethinking of the understanding of the historic personality of the prominent Ukrainian artist Shevchenko and remixing it with images of popular culture. All the images were presented to the public at one of the Kyiv Underground stations, with pictures including an image of Shevchenko blended into those of Harry Potter, Yoda, Einstein, David Bowie, Terminator, the Statue of Liberty in New York and so many more. Each picture has the caption, where the artist, Oleksandr Grekhov, offers his viewpoint on what these personalities have in common (“Kiivs’kij hudožnik”, 2019).

4.7. Revealing collective identity

The next question in this research is how onymic memeplexes reveal collective identity. In broad terms, *identity* can be described as “an individual’s sense of self defined by (a) a set of physical, psychological and interpersonal characteristics that is not wholly shared with any other person and (b) a range of affiliations (e.g. ethnicity) and social roles” (VandenBos, 2015, p. 561).

Krogseth (2012, p. 162) outlines three criteria of identity in his research on Norwegian place names: *continuity* through time, *integrity* or inner coherence, and *individuality* or personal character. These three factors can also be observed in onymic memeplexes. Firstly, continuity through time can be clearly seen in the so-called pre-internet memeplexes, such as the well-known Ukrainian song *Червона рута* [Chervona ruta]. It embodies social inheritance, judging from its longstanding popularity, memetic longevity, and connections between older and younger generations including the mechanisms of replication, where the ways of performing the song can be seen as memetic variability. In the same vein, proper names actualize identities and due to recurrent use create cultural narratives (Sjöblom, 2021, p. 258). Secondly, inner coherence is actualized through lots of elements that coincide forming one concept. Thirdly, individuality can be regarded as a default characteristic for onymic memeplexes. The core characteristics are not affected by performance acts since its nature remains intact by an individual performance. Here, we are likely to find the set of core components that make this memeplex distinct from others. In the case of *Chervona Ruta*, these differentiae include tune, way of performing (individually, in a group, a cappella, by professional performers or amateurs, music genre, etc.), and lyrics. They might be diverse but altogether recognizable to the Ukrainian community.

A memeplex shapes and displays existing social norms thus actualizing social conventions. These shared standards involve constant repetition and replication. “Repetition and also identity are thus projected back into the past and forward into the future because participants in a tradition also imagine their descendants continuing their practices” (Drout, 2006, p. 275). As we can deduce, identity, revealed through onymic memeplexes, can be based on repetitive social practices and on the chain of communication, which marks the membership in a community (Kripke, 2001, p. 91). As described above, *Chervona Ruta* has become a Ukrainian memeplex and identity marker since its creation in the 1970s. Since that time this memeplex was passed to the subsequent generations via social channels and now it is considered an unofficial hymn of Ukraine (Gorodnycha, 2020).

At the higher level, collective identity is delineated through the proper name inventory. This compilation is chosen by a social group and this choice determines this group. Thus, the memeplexes selected by both an internet community and real-life groups reveal their aesthetic tastes, degree of humor, political preferences, collective psychological portrait, and likings for various lifestyles. They form a *memescape*, a communal choice of memes to express themselves. Here we could claim that by observing a memescape one could define the group using it. The situation is similar to the way toponyms have an impact on the identity of a person (Pedersen, 2012, p. 169). Hence, proper names as memeplexes are an inherent part of a memescape and play an important role in revealing collective identity.

4.8. Representing cultural heritage

In this part of our article, we turn to the way onymic memeplexes represent cultural heritage. Proper names are likely to have a memetic nature that acquired strong cultural connotations due to the effect of cumulative cultural evolution. These memetic onyms have core characteristics communicated by the participants of the community; they are used as memeplexes that form a cultural identity. Onymic memeplexes represent the potential for cultural persistence and identity markers as cultural artefacts.

People use naming to claim the landscape as a device for communicating heritage and identity (Alderman, 2016, p. 199). In a similar vein, *St. Sophia of Kyiv* is seen as an element of national cultural heritage by both Ukrainians (Sim chudes Ukrayiny, n.d.) and the whole world (UNESCO World heritage Convention, n.d.). Ainiala (2016, p. 459) notes that collective identity is emphasized through the usage of proper names inherent only to these groups. The proper name *St. Sophia* has shorter forms in everyday speech like *Sophia*, which also shows the variability of this memeplex. To illustrate, we turned to Twitter:

Обожнюю Київ! Виходиш з театру, а на Софії КМДА влаштувала вечір опери. [I adore Kyiv! You go out of the theatre and the city administration has organized opera night at *Sophia*.] (Nata, 2021)

Here we can see the segments pointing out the representation of cultural heritage by an onymic memeplex.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The aim of the research presented was to examine the similarities between proper names and memeplexes. To date, proper names have not been researched from this perspective. In this study, we have made an attempt to determine the general characteristics of memeplexes such as rapid spread, expression of social and cultural norms, longevity, adaptability, variability, revealing collective identity and defining cultural heritage. Similar aspects were investigated and analyzed within the sphere of proper names. The results of this study indicate that a proper name can be outlined as a memeplex with different ranges of popularity. Some proper names can be seen as onymic memeplexes within small social groups, while others could be regarded as national heritage and cultural artefacts.

This article is but a single step into the vast memetic ocean of proper names. As such, it leaves many aspects of the Ukrainian memescape unexplored. Also, this approach to Ukrainian proper names could have more general perspective on properhood and proper names in other cultures. Avenues for future development

might include research on the memespaces of different age, social, ethnic groups and subgroups; investigations into intercultural exchange; or studies of onomastic memescape mapping. More research on onomastic memeplexes of diverse social and cultural groups would help us to establish the various aspects and mechanisms of the memetic nature of proper names. Also, considerably more work needs to be done in outlining local, national, and international memespaces.

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SUMMARY

This paper is an effort to present our understanding of onyms as memetic entities. Here we made an attempt to define and analyse the essential characteristics of memeplexes and proper names. The analysis of the traditional and modern approaches to proper names is offered. According to these views, a proper name can be regarded as a concept, it defines a unique phenomenon and is actualised by social convention, thus being embedded into the onomastic landscape. These characteristics overlap with those of memeplexes. The study proposes insight into the similar features of memeplexes and Ukrainian proper names and concentrates on the defining aspects of memetic onyms (onymic memeplexes). An onymic memeplex is seen as any proper name possessing memetic qualities. All memeplexes are highly likely to possess the following key features: rapid spread, expression of social and cultural norms, longevity, adaptability, variability, revealing collective identity and defining cultural heritage. These aspects have many iterations in national and international onomastic landscapes.